

## CULTURAL RESEARCH

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# A sociological view over the present scenery of Kung Fu in the occident: a comprehensive panorama over the Chinese martial arts in Brazil

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### Abstract

The origin of the Chinese Kung Fu recaptures the origins of its own civilization. The relationship among this specific form of combat, the local religious beliefs and the Chinese traditional medicine created unique fighting concepts. The first Chinese immigrants arrived in Brazil in 1812, but only during the 1960s this martial art was recognized in the country as a valuable art to be practiced. Hence, understanding the way the West has brought and disseminated this practice with distinctive characteristics to the Eastern society is the main point of this paper. Its focus is to analyze this process and its consequences to Kung Fu in Brazil. So, considering the process of globalization and westernization, we present some answers that help to understand this current scenario in Brazil.

### Introduction

Given the numerous sports and bodily activities, widespread and practiced in Brazil we look at this article about martial arts, whose practices originated largely in the East, and have now spread nationally with a large number of practitioners<sup>1</sup>. These practices have proven over time as an effective

self-defense and also of cultural diffusion. Among the many martial practices taught in our country, we will discuss the Chinese martial practice, called *Kung Fu*.

We must first point out that the appropriation of the term from the media (as books and movies) was remarkable<sup>2</sup>, but that name does not appear to

<sup>1</sup> According to a survey by the Atlas of the sport in Brazil (available in <http://www.atlasesportebrasil.org.br/index.php>, accessed on: 09/06/11), we have: Karate (800,000 practitioners), Judo (between 1 and 2 million), Jiu-Jitsu (350 practitioners) and Kung Fu (230,100 practitioners).

<sup>2</sup> Apolloni [2004] also raises the hypothesis that the use of „Kung Fu” movies and series have been very important factor for its use in the West, based this choice on marketing issues. In: Apolloni, Rodrigo Wolff. Shaolin à brasileira: Estudo sobre a presença e a transformação de elementos religiosos orientais no Kung-Fu praticado no Brasil [The *Brazilian Shaolin*: Study on

be the most appropriate to describe such practices in the Chinese martial tradition. According to Reid and Croucher [2003, p. 266]: “Kung Fu simply means “diligent practice and perfect mastery of an art”, while the term in Chinese that means “art or martial system” is *Wushu*”. According to the study by Apolloni [2004], the term Kung Fu reached the West in the eighteenth century, brought by Jesuit priests who were in China. In Chinese martial arts, historical records point to ancient practices, directly related to philosophies and religions such as Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, among others. Apolloni [2004] presents in his review of Chinese martial representations with three thousand years, in bronze vessels dating from about 1000 BC. Imamura [1994] reports the mythical origin of martial arts in 4000 dated to 2000 BC, the period of the mythical sovereign.

When they came to be taught in the West, they become an important instrument of cultural dissemination, and ultimately contributing to the approach and the recognition of Chinese culture in our country. According to Marta [2009] and Apolloni [2004], they have initially been passed in Brazil alone, mainly as a complement to treatments performed with Chinese Medicine. After this first contact, the influence of Kung Fu movies, enthusiastically received in the country in the 1970s helped to create a great demand for practitioners, which lead to Chinese immigrants who were aware of this martial art starting to teach on the open market. According to Hall [2001, p. 74]:

*Cultural flows among nations, and global consumerism, create opportunities for “shared identities” - as “consumers” for the goods, “customer” for the same services, “public” to the same messages and images - among people who are quite far apart in space and time. The extent to which national cultures become more exposed to external influences, it is difficult to maintain cultural identities intact or prevent them from becoming weakened by the bombing and cultural infiltration.*

The expression and commercial sportive form of Kung Fu followed the model and the process released by the European bias. According to Melo [2009, p. 36]:

*From the outset it is important to make clear that there was certainly a unique way of developing the sport in Brazil. As this was a cultural import that arrived with the winds blowing mainly to modernize the European continent, the sport took on Brazilian soil such a peculiar shape due to the different natures of*

*contact with the outside and because of the dialogue established with the local specificities.*

According to Soares and Vaz [2009], the sport has become over time more as a product of modernity, which has spread in different ways in the four corners of the planet. According to those authors, it has occupied a prominent place in economic issues. The result was a process of globalization whose consequences are usually discussed from two perspectives, one negative, which would be lost meanings and values of these modalities because of their mass and a more positive, where the ownership would reduce distances and manifest itself in a multicultural perspective. But anyway, these practices were eventually affected. According to these authors:

*In the construction of identity in sport, in Brazilian, Argentine, British and European culture, essential differences are built upon respect of “us” and “other.” But national identities cannot be thought of as monolithic structures or stable, because identities are and always have been to some degree, changing, open, renegotiated and redefined in different relational contexts. In this sense, identity built on the sports field is not limited just like the Brazilians see themselves and define themselves. There is a reflexivity in the process of construction which includes the view of the “other.” [2009, p. 493]*

The sociologist Norbert Elias [1992] presents some of the characteristics that govern the structure of modern sport, including its cathartic power and mimetic, which he summarizes as that which is appropriate these practices (as a practitioner, consumer, or both): an ability to control, release and vent emotions that could not be explored openly in a civilized society, without posing some risks. Rules of this possibility arise, confederations (to enforce them and develop them), finally, to institutionalize the modern sport. Thus, martial arts at different times within societies, influenced by or influencing them, ended up losing their original characteristics of the arts of war. This “adaptation” of practices that have become combat sports and therapies may be justified on the changes in society, where many of the techniques used, whether with guns, whether with his body, have become obsolete. Also according to Elias [1994, p. 91]:

*Forced to live a new way in society, people become more susceptible to pressure from others. Not suddenly, but slowly, the code of behavior becomes more rigorous and increases the expected degree of consideration of others. The sense of what to do and not do to offend or shock the other makes- is more subtle and, in conjunction with the new power relations, the social*

the presence and transformation of Eastern religious elements in Kung Fu practiced in Brazil]. Thesis, PUC-São Paulo, 2004.

imperative not to offend their fellow becomes narrower compared with the phase precedent.

In a way such practices would lose meaning if simply transported to modern times. As pointed Starepravo and Mezzadri [2003, p. 50] "the military techniques gave way to the techniques of debate, rhetoric and persuasion, requiring greater self-control, featuring an advancing civilization."

Within this framework, we can begin to look at sports as well within the guidelines of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who stresses the need to analyze a practice within the set of other sports, recognizing the position it occupies in the space of sports. The next step would be to relate this space with social space in which it manifests. Within this logic, Marchi Júnior [2004] points out that these modern sports would be something new, or still in training, a structure dating back to mid-eighteenth century. For this author:

In essence, the gap in the process of appropriation of sports is the establishment of relations between the space of the offer - historically defined practices for the possible - and seeks to provide space for practice. In other words, the offering is a space for athletic programmes, which characterize the intrinsic properties and techniques of the sport. [2004, p. 59]

### Globalization and modernization process

The first Kung Fu masters who arrived in Brazil brought martial arts practices that were very difficult to be interpreted by the new group of disciples they found. This transposition of eastern practice to the West is understood by Marta [2009, p. 143] as a 'Westernization process.' Apolloni [2004, p. 12] sets some questions in this matter:

What is the value that athletes give to the religious preaches of Kung Fu? What is your view over the altars, the incense's burning and the characteristics signs found in the academies? Do they overflow the ideograms semantic barrier? How can these elements be referred to the historical past of Kung Fu? Are the Chinese masters able to teach in Portuguese such abstract concepts for the occidental mind, as Tao's or Chan's enlightenment?

This difficulty of absorption and the need to adapt these practices to a marketing aspect can lead to a withdrawal or sublimation of rituals and practices hitherto important in the original context of these martial arts. Consequence of this would be an even greater forms of martial *sportivization*, consumables and much more acceptable to Western society. According to Apolloni [2004], the first Kung

Fu competitions dating from the late 1950, later adopting protection along the lines of competitive boxing and Tae-kwon-do, and a division by weight of the athletes. The world championships representing about 56 countries and the main objective of the Chinese Olympic Committee would make the Olympic sport of Wushu.

In Kung Fu marketing bias, the media played a key role in reducing the distance between East and West. Although the media representation in most cases is not very consistent with the reality of the martial arts tradition, the enormous interest aroused by the film contributes to arouse a great initial interest in practice hitherto unknown. According to Marta [2009] the 1960 and 1970 in Brazil were of extreme importance for the development of oriental martial arts in our country. Pimenta [2008] draws attention to the fact that often the presentation of mystical and transcendental in the means media can contribute to ignoring one of these historical processes and social practices.

### Discussion

the rapprochement between East and West has led to increasingly strong bonds of economic, cultural, philosophical and religious ties, among others. As Ianni [2004, p.24] pointed:

Gradually, to modify or dissolve the lines between the West and East, Africa and Europe, and Latin America and Anglo-Saxon America, due to the transcontinental migration, flows of global markets, the global movement of ideas, the artistic, sporting and other, besides the multiplication of negotiations, mergers and acquisitions within corporations, and the tensions, solutions and irresolution. All these are moving the machine of the world.

This author also calls attention to the fact that much of the image we have of a social reality is grounded in films, television and Romanesque, and these elements contribute to the understanding, explanation or even the invention of reality. Thus, films, books and magazines can contribute in a construction of blurred martial reality, or provide data to a doubtful and de-virtualized interpretation, including re-interpretation difficult. However, as pointed out by Betti [1997] can no longer try to disassociate the sports media.

Following this same line, Marta [2009] warns that beginners eventually notice some mismatch between the viewing and what is actually taught, not staying long in the practice of martial mode chosen. Apolloni [2004] presents a new Chinese martial connotation due to the media this relationship,

i.e., a transcultural phenomenon, which has lost its national boundaries and would have been appropriate for different cultural sources.

The role of media sources in the initial transmission of Kung Fu in Brazil is something that should not be overlooked. Although some caution is required for this type of analysis, we must remember that it was from these ways that many practitioners have been and continue to seek a school or a teacher to begin the practice of Chinese martial art, and also created a favorable demand for immigrants started to share his knowledge.

The practice and absorption of a martial art that could be understood as the complex passes through Western eyes to what Stuart Hall points as a kind of cultural supermarket, where they could get, because the new guidelines from the process of globalization, goods hitherto typical and limited to a particular culture. However, in the case of Kung Fu we prefer to consider this scenario with certain reservations. The ease of appropriation by more adapted to its spread may have become, is still not as free and inclusive. We prefer to look at this point according to the approach of the sinologist François Jullien, who says:

[...] There have been described many times the citizen's cultural world of the future as someone who would do their shopping at wholesale stores, this sort of "supermarket" of world culture, and will choose the products on the display, from one shelf to another to carry them in your cart ... But the image is false: the notions and cultural representations are not so separable from its context to leave organized side by side on the shelf of "rationalism" or "hedonism" or "salvation" (a dash of Zen a pinch of Epicureanism, a pinch of negative theology and you prepare, returning home, your happiness). For as we do not realize that these shelves were built exclusively by European categories of reason, that is Western culture, now globalized, which designed their packaging, their ratings, and even their labels - and even fully built this immense store became a big bazaar - as they are now willing, with its circuits designed for consumption? [2008, p. 158]

Therefore, the struggle for a Chinese martial identity, an ancient practice passed in modern times, seems to be a conflict faced by China, which seeks to maintain roots and traditions amid the advances of modernity. An example of this new scenario is indicated by Trevisan [2009] where the famous Shaolin Temple, considered the birthplace of Kung Fu and turning enough today to marketing practices, including having inspired the spectacle presented on Broadway in 2009 entitled "The spirit Shaolin." For Marta [2009] we should recognize that the interior of martial practices remains a field of

tension, preventing the definition of a single course for them. An important point which should also be considered is the reverse process, which, according to Octavio Ianni is characterized as:

Strictly speaking, Westernization is not prevented from occurring at the same time as easternization. There are many indications that there is an ongoing vigorous process of westernization of the world, both as regards the technical and economic practices, such as on cultural elements, including Taoism, yoga, acupuncture, meditation and others. Since the dawn of modern times and in different more or less intense outbreaks since then, diffuse and absorb up signs, symbols and emblems from China, India, Japan and other Eastern societies, often with elements more or less noticeable of Islam. [2004, p. 125]

Therefore, consideration of the process of globalization and westernization, and the role of the media and issues related to immigration paths show very interesting and even vital to understanding and discussion of Chinese martial scene in Brazil. We seek in this way, rather than conclude the direction of these events, given that we understand as a process still under construction, provide useful tools to discuss Kung Fu in the West.

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### **Socjologiczne spojrzenie na obecną sytuację kung fu na Zachodzie: kompleksowa panorama chińskich sztuk walki w Brazylii**

**Słowa kluczowe:** sztuki walki, proces okcydentalizacji, proces globalizacji, Brazylia

#### **Streszczenie**

pochodzenie chińskiego kung fu odtwarza początki własnej cywilizacji. Związek pomiędzy tę szczególną sztuką walki, lokalnymi wierzeniami religijnymi a tradycyjną medycyną chińską stworzył unikalną koncepcję walki. Pierwsi Chińczycy imigranci przybyli do Brazylii w 1812, ale dopiero w latach 60 ubiegłego wieku sztuka ta została uznana w tym kraju jako cenna

sztuka walki. Głównym celem pracy jest próba zrozumienia sposobu w jaki Zachód sprowadził i rozpropagował te praktyki o cechach charakterystycznych dla społeczeństw Wschodu. Praca koncentruje się na analizie wyżej wymienionego procesu i jego konsekwencjach dla kung fu w Brazylii. Biorąc pod uwagę procesy globalizacji i westernizacji, autorzy przedstawiają niektóre z odpowiedzi pomocne w zrozumieniu aktualnego planu zdarzeń w Brazylii.

W pierwszej części tekstu autorzy powołują się na źródła wyjaśniające znaczenie słowa kung fu w języku chińskim, jako „pilna praktyka i perfekcyjne opanowanie umiejętności, podczas gdy *wushu* jest zbiorowym określeniem wszystkich odmian chińskiej sztuki walki. Za pośrednictwem środków masowego przekazu doszło do pewnego zniekształcenia polegającego na odejściu od pierwowzoru językowego i upowszechnieniu w wielu krajach zwrotu kung fu właśnie na określenie chińskich sztuk walki. Według cytowanego Apolloniego pojęcie kung fu dotarło na Zachód w XVIII wieku przyniesione przez jezuitów przybywających z Chin. Natomiast odniesienia do samych sztuk walki znajdują się w licznych starożytnych praktykach bezpośrednio związanych z filozofiami i wierzeniami panującymi w Chinach. Najwcześniejsze źródła zawierają wzmianki o mitycznych początkach sztuk walki, datowane na 2000 lat p.n.e.

Po pojawieniu się na Zachodzie, sztuki walki były ściśle związane z medycyną chińską, jako terapią uzupełniającą leczenie. Później, w latach 70 do popularności kung fu przyczyniły się liczne filmy. Pierwsi mistrzowie kung fu, którzy przybyli do Brazylii, przywieźli ze sobą praktyki trudne do zinterpretowania przez nowych uczniów. Przeniesienie wschodnich praktyk na grunt zachodni określane jest tu mianem „westernizacji”. Ta trudność absorpcji i konieczność dostosowania praktyk (aspekt marketingu) może doprowadzić do wycofania lub sublimacji rytuałów i praktyk dotychczas ważnych w oryginalnym kontekście tych sztuk walki. W trakcie procesu globalizacji granice między państwami i kontynentami zostały zatarte z powodu migracji, handlu, przepływu idei artystycznych, sportowych i tym podobnych, a tym samym zmieniły się oryginalne chińskie sztuki walki.